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Or, SOCIAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES IN THE USE OF MASS MEDIA IN ADULT EDUCATION
-- A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Robert J. Blakely

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The author's purpose is to point to some issues, indicate some differing positions and call attention to some sources of ideas and information. After indicating broad notions of adult education and the mass media, he defines the issues broadly, with the key issue being the chasm between man's power and his ability to use it for his own good, individually and collectively. He then focuses on technology, of which the media of mass communications are both causes and effects. To balance the allure of human-behavior technolatry, he notes the complexity of our human condition and the limits of human knowledge.

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"I'M BEGINNING TO THINK LIKE THE BIRD!" Or, Social and Philosophical Issues in the Use of Mass Media in Adult Education--A Review of the Literature

Robert J. Blakely

My purpose is to point at some issues, indicate some differing positions and call attention to some sources of ideas and information. First, the context:

Man's uncontrolled physical growth in all its aspects (such as numbers, consumption, waste and destruction, particularly through war) will be curbed, if not by self-control, then by catastrophe. Self-control will require appropriate planning and cooperation, and these will require appropriate changes in human behavior, by both individuals and groups. Can these changes be brought about? If so, can they be brought about by means and toward ends that respect democratic values: if not, attempts will be made to bring them about by other means and toward other ends.

Education is the management of human learning to change behavior in intended ways. Therefore, the questions posed in the paragraph above are about education. Since the answers will be given in the next few generations,[1]* the questions are about adult education.

"Adult education" (the purposeful, systematic learning by adults) is usually distinguished from the "education of adults" (the learning by adults that occurs from all experience). In the face of the enormity of the issue indicated above, "adult education" as presently practiced is barely significant, and the "education of adults" so defined is beside the point, because it is really not education at all, but rather random learning, not directed to bring about intended changes in behavior. However, all experience can be made educative. Therefore, I suggest we need another conception of adult education: the systematic use of education to affect all experience, and the systematic use of all experience to achieve self-education. A physician has written, "The ideal situation is one in which a doctor doesn't know when he is engaged in continuing his medical education and when he is engaged in giving medical care." Substitute other words for the underlined ones to cover the various roles adults fill, and you get the idea.

Let's follow that idea. What is a doctor for? To oppose disease and to promote health. But a society's health is advanced mainly by the care the people give themselves. By analogy, it follows that adult education as I am defining it must be primarily self-education. The argument rests on more than analogy: Education is the management of learning; one can help another person learn (educate him), but that other person is the one who learns. Tough (31)** found that

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*Footnotes appear on page 5.

**Numbers in parentheses refer to items in bibliography beginning on page 6.

self-teachers naturally go through most of the steps that professional educators do in curriculum planning and management.[2] The main role of the adult educator should be to help self-teachers systematize their self-learning.

The systematic effort to radiate all experience with self-education and to use all experience as a curriculum in self-education would involve the media of mass communications--necessarily, because mass communications have to a high degree taken over the function of society communicating, and their chief influences seems to be secondary--that is, reflected to the group and back again.[3]

These broad notions of adult education and the mass media (I find any narrower views to be inadequate) lead me in this essay to define the issues broadly, as I have done elsewhere (2). A key issue is certainly the chasm between man's power and his ability to use it for his own good, individually and collectively. "Technology," defined as tools (intellectual, organizational, methodological and physical) has become the catchword. Hence I focus on technology, of which the media of mass communications are both causes and effects.

* * *

For social-psychological background, I include Wallas (32), which book, first published in 1914, is available again, in paperback. For penetration into some benignant possibilities, Wiener (33) is peerless. Boulding (5) sees humanity in transition from "civilized to post-civilized society"; he identifies traps on the way ahead and proposes a strategy to avoid them. Elul (11) posits that technology has already assumed a life of its own and is irresistably out of control; after finishing this book, one knows how Oedipus felt when he found out that he had already murdered his father and married his mother. Ferkiss (12) has written the best balanced book on the subject that I know, with a rich bibliography; his last chapter provides a list of basic educational goals in terms of concepts, attitudes and values.

Coming specifically to the United States, Galbraith (14) argues that industry must control public response to meet the needs of long-range planning and massive investment, and that military expenditures are more easily justified than expenditures for the public welfare; this argument, of course, is much concerned with the mass media--advertising and propaganda in particular. He believes scientists and academic intellectuals may be able to reverse the trend, which view, of course, has many entailments for adult education. Marcuse (17), in contrast, proclaims that the radical empiricism of modern scientific thought and its technological social system absorb all criticism and make all opposition into support for themselves--hence "one dimensional" man and society. If you don't agree with him, he regards you as a one-dimensional person. You should then read another of his works to know what he and other multi-dimensional men have in store for you after the revolution--"repressive tolerance" (18). Mesthene (19) rejects the views that technology is an unalloyed blessing, an unalloyed curse, or merely "more of the same"; he argues that, properly used, technology can enhance individual freedom and individuality; the book has a useful annotated bibliography.[4] Drucker (9) throws fresh, cheerful light on what is happening and may happen; his analysis of "ever-extended schooling" versus" continuing education" is particularly powerful; his conception of "continuing education" is in agreement with the notion of adult education I have sketched above.

Coming specifically to the mass media (better, the electronic media), Bagdikian (1) analyses their role in a democracy, and Miller (20) documents their dangers to privacy and freedom. Bagdikian foretells a measure of popular participation through the media that "will be to politics what nuclear fission was to physical weapons. . . . The new communications will permit the accumulation of a critical mass of human attention and impulse that up to now has been inconceivable." Miller summarizes reasons why we should worry about the developing capabilities to gather, store, retrieve and abuse information. Elul in another work (10) makes an important distinction between political propaganda and sociological propaganda; in this work he lets shine forth a faint hope of a "very profound reality--the possibility of choice and differentiation, which is the fundamental characteristic of the individual in the democratic society." Boorstin (5) is primarily concerned with the social organization of the media--their ability and propensity, not just to communicate messages, but to create them by creating "pseudo-events."[5] The Image, published in 1961, grows in importance with the spread of the practice and perfection of the technique of trying to make the "free market place of ideas" a choice among shadows on the wall of the cave.

Now, who has escaped from the cave, studied the sun, and returned to manipulate the shadows on the wall for our own good? Why, B. F. Skinner, of course, with his "operant conditioning" now apotheosized into a "technology of human behavior." In conjunction with Beyond Freedom and Dignity (28) you should read also Walden Two (29) for two reasons: First, it reveals that in his writings that go beyond reports on experiments with simpler forms of life and experiments with low-level types of human learning in voluntary situations, Skinner is not a scientist but a religious figure.[6] Second, in BFD Skinner rests his argument upon alleged "experimental proof" that exists only in his 1948 novel. (Just to match Walden Two with another novel I have included Karp (16).)

BFD is an important book, not for itself (it says nothing new), but for people's reactions to it. Will they accept "operant conditioning" as a valuable contribution? Or will they follow the self-proclaimed god toward a heaven on earth?

In BFD Skinner explains why "operant conditioning" contains a built-in protection against tyranny: "...we must not overlook the control exerted by the pigeon." Don Marquis' worm, in Archy and Mehitabel, protests for a while against being swallowed by a bird, but finally cries, "I'm beginning to think like the bird!" BFD tells us what kind of a bird.

* * *

To balance the allure of human-behavior technolatry, let us note the complexity of our human situation and the limits of human knowledge. Tiger and Fox (30) sketch the evolutionary history of our species and state that the individual "is an active, searching and stubborn participant in the learning process, not just a receiver." Psychologists who are studying babies and small children agree. I know of no compendious statement of the many findings coming out of babyhood and early childhood research, but Piaget (22) is still valid.

Just as we should be aware of complexities, we should be aware of arrogance

and pretentiousness too. Boguslaw (3) started a study merely to describe problems in system analysis and design but came to see "that modern system designers were unconsciously treading well-worn paths-- that they were unconsciously embracing the most fundamental errors of earlier (utopian) efforts and were incorporating them into the fabric of even the most sophisticated of pushbutton systems." After distinguishing the four basic approaches and defining their limitations, he concludes: "The spectrum of values represented in the new decision-making order can be and is being increasingly more circumscribed by fiat disguised as technological necessity. The paramount issues...are not technological. They are issues of values and the power through which these values become translated into action."

However, once an "expert" has waded into the river of pretension, he, like Macbeth, is likely to try to wade through to the other side. If he does not pretend to even greater expertness, the "expertise entrepreneur" takes over to try to redeem the muddle with his "rhetoric of science." (8) Once in a while, to the realization that one has been acting on inadequate knowledge there is an honest, "Back to the old drawing board." Alice M. Rivlin helped develop systems analysis, or PPBS (Program-Planning-Budgeting-System) for HEW. Reviewing the results, she concludes (25): "So far the analysts have probably done more to reveal how difficult the problems and choices are than to make the decisions easier." This, of course, is an important gain.

But it is a bitter medicine that some "behavioral scientists" refuse to take. A few are likening the certainty of their "science" to that of physics; yet at this very time, the more philosophically minded physicists are realizing that the border between "object" and "subject" is blurred, that deterministic laws are being replaced by statistical ones, and that the scientist is also a human being and a citizen.

In this age when all thoughtful people are aware that cultures are relative, and aware, too, that vast forces are beyond our control, who can believe in absolute individual freedom and responsibility? But ours is also an age when the arrogant pretensions of scientism are being exposed. If one believes that man is entirely the product of his genetical, physical, social and cultural situations, it is not because he is compelled to believe that by undeniable proof but because he has willed to do so. The entire Western heritage, from which science and technology have developed, is based on the assumption that in significant measure the individual human being is free to choose and is responsible for the consequences of his choice, and that the goal of all nurture should be to enlarge that measure. If we now abandon this assumption, where are we? (7)

Reich (24) wrote: "All of us who work in organizations should begin to assume a responsibility that is larger than the particular job we do, and this responsibility should ultimately be recognized, protected and enforced by law." He was analyzing the case of Lieutenant Calley, but by the time his article appeared, his readers were thinking also about the case of the Pentagon Papers. It is not unlikely that Lieutenant Calley will go free and Daniel Ellsberg will go to prison. Here we come to the basic issue: What is the nature of man? (23) (27)

FOOTNOTES

[1]See Forrester (13), which book is an exposition of graphs printed out by a computer fed with formulas of such changes as population, natural resources, capital investments and pollution. The chilling results are only educated guesses, of course, but they are probably the best we have. And who does not know that things cannot go on much longer the way they are going? Who can look at the on-coming generations and say, "They will do better in proportion to the problems they face than the present generation is doing with the problems we face?" The present generation of adults is only beginning to try to look ahead. For a pioneering attempt to analyze the process of assessing the consequences of technology, see National Academy of Sciences (21).

[2]A publication of Tough's subsequent research is scheduled for this year.

[3]See (26) for a succinct statement of views Schramm has developed in many volumes before and after 1954. This yearbook was edited by Edgar Dale, another towering figure in the field of the effects and uses of mass media. Dale (alas!) has discontinued The News Letter (published by the College of Education, Ohio State University), which he wrote and edited from November 1935 until May 1971. Happily, an anthology from his essays in the 287 issues has been published (6).

[4]This volume was a product of the Harvard University Program on Technology and Society, supported by International Business Machines since 1964. The program was scheduled to last for 10 years but has recently been terminated. If you are interested in the results--already out and still in the mill--you had better find out what they are and make selections. The address is 61 Kirkland Street, Cambridge 02138.

[5]This work, in my opinion, is much sounder than those of McLuhan beginning with Understanding Media. I have not included that book in the bibliography because his ideas are familiar now and McLuhan seems to have burned himself out by trying to be "hot" all the time. To compensate, I have included a work by another Canadian, a profound scholar, now dead, whose writings are not well known in the United States (15).

[6]The narrator in Walden Two says of Frazier, the designer of the "operant-conditioning utopia:" "Frazier's program was essentially a religious movement freed of any dallying with the supernatural and inspired to build a heaven on earth. What could stop him?" Frazier (Skinner) himself says: "Perhaps I must yield to God in point of seniority ... Though...I might claim...that I made a more explicit statement of my plan."

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